WORLD COMMUNION MEDITATION
Isaiah 25:6-9, Revelation 7:9-17
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He did not time his visit to coincide with World Communion Sunday, but it is impossible to think about the meaning and intent of this day apart from the Papal visit of John Paul II. We are, after all, in the middle of several major media events. The baseball season is in the process of its grand finale. The football schedule has generated a full head of steam. The 1980 Presidential election campaign began sometime in recent days. But the headlines and prime time last week belonged to a Polish Roman Catholic almost totally unknown in this country until a year ago.

What do you make of it? - Boston Commons, Yankee Stadium, Philadelphia, Chicago, Washington; secular - Big City people, cynical, skeptical, Easterners. The man they came to see wears clothes people haven't worn for seven hundred years. The crowds, I don't think, were there because of what he has said. A substantial minority of the members of the church he leads don't agree with his position on clerical celibacy, abortion and the role of women in ministry. A majority simply ignore what he has said about birth control. How then to understand the tremendous outpouring of enthusiasm, interest and love?

My conclusion is that John Paul II strikes a resonant chord in the hearts of many people, Protestants as well as Roman Catholics, Church people and non-Church people, when he talks about reconciliation and peace and the human family. I believe there is a sense in which he, himself, symbolizes a vision and hope that all the world's people are feeling more urgently today than ever before. I think there is a sense in which no one else in the world could have gone to Ireland as he did, and said the things he said, and be heard: or come to this country and say that the rich cannot continue to give the table crumbs to the poor - and be heard. I know that no one else could have gone to Poland and talked about freedom and been heard.

John Paul II has affirmed in a very unique way the oneness and commonality of Christian people throughout the world. But more than that, he has reminded us of an even bigger idea: the oneness and commonality of the whole human family. He has, for me at least, become a reminder that the Christian faith points to a future hope, a noble vision of peace and harmony between people.

It is the fundamental Biblical assertion: it is the first theme in the symphony, in counterpoint to which the rest of the story is told. In Eden, all is peace and harmony: that is how God intends it, until men and women create their own rules and then their children begin to fight and one kills the other. And if you don't get the point the first time around, read on, about the nations building their tower and the great disruption, the fragmenting of the human race, the inability of people to understand one another. That, in the Bible, is the great tragedy, against which the rest of the drama is played out.

The original vision did not die, however. If you listen carefully you can hear its echoes: in the Psalter, for instance: "Behold, how pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity" or in an ancient Rabbinical saying: "The Messiah will come only when all the guests have taken their places at the table" or in the Prophet Isaiah, looking into the dim future and writing about a feast on a mountain and the Lord God destroying "on this mountain the covering that is cast over all peoples, the veil that is spread over all nationa". In the Old Testament God's will for creation

may be described as the peace and unity of the human family: the reality of the human condition, however, may be described as fracture, fragmentation, alienation: and the divine activity may always be defined as the process which brings together and heals that which is broken.

It is a motif which continues in the New Testament. At Pentecost, the gift of the Spirit enables people of different tongues and nations and races to understand one another. The disruption, represented by the Tower of Babel at the beginning of the story, is reversed on Pentecost. Now people can understand again. Jesus Christ puts people in touch with one another and heals the divisions between them.

It is a past and present vision in the Bible, but it is also future - and it is the future dimension, the dimension of hope and expectation with which we have the most trouble. A lonely Christian exile on an island in the Mediterranean contemplated the horrible persecution inflicted on his fellow Christians by the Roman emperor Nero. Instead of morbidity and depression, however, what he wrote about was peace, harmony, unity. He had to use cryptic, symbolic codes - and sometimes we have great difficulty comprehending what he meant but in the 7th chapter of Revelation - this vision sounds familiar...

> "After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no man could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne...they shall hunger no more, nor thirst any more...and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."

Whatever happened to our vision, our future hope, our confidence that our God is leading the human family to a new day of peace and reconciliation? President James McCord of Princeton Seminary says that we are the first generation of Christians who have refused to look to the future. We have, he suggests, lost the ability to talk about the future intelligently. We - meaning middle of the road - Protestants - have abandoned the field to the fringe groups. That is part of the powerful appeal of radical cults, both left and right. They are guided by a clear vision of what the future will be.

Henri Noumen, Dutch Roman Catholic theologian, describing what he calls "nuclear man" writes: "The world of the past is gone forever. The future is blurry.. He is not working hard to reach a goal, he does not look forward to the fulfillment of a great desire, nor does he expect that something great or important is about to happen. He looks into empty space and is sure of only one thing: if there is anything worthwhile in life it must be here and now." (The Wounded Healer, p.4).

Douglas John Hall, a Canadian theologian I had the privilege of meeting and talking with this summer, observes very perceptively, "What the conservatives among us are really trying to conserve is not the past, but a vision of the future that belonged to the past." (Lighten Our Darkness, p.61). That is to say, we don't have a vision of the future. We, for the first time in history George Gallup told us a while ago, think the past was better than the future is going to be.

The result is that articulate Christians have stopped talking about the future, turned their backs on the future, abandoned the future to extremists of

of left or right who envision, pray for and work for either the revolution or the end of the world.

But on this day - World Communion Sunday - we are reminded that the God we worship is still drawing us into a future of peace and reconciliation. On this day we are acting out a dream as old as Isaiah with his feast on the mountain. On this day, all over the world, people are gathering around the table of the Lord.

Long live that vision. God bless that vision.

John Paul II, with his curious attire and broken English is an eloquent reminder. Others keep emerging in contemporary history. In Russia, Orthodox Christians hold tightly to the hope, and affirm it themselves by crowding into their churches in embarrassingly large numbers. In China, Christian people have clung to the vision and the hope for thirty years and emerged this year whole, alive, well, strong. In Ballycastle, Northern Ireland, Corrymeela Center, Protestant and Catholic Christians, in the face of devastating alienation, stubbornly cling to the hope. We've expressed our solidarity with them: they've sent us a Chalice and Patin to remind us of their solidarity with us - and this week I received a letter from the Center Director, Derick Wilson, telling me about a worship service for the Cross Group he called it: very special people - Catholic and Protestant families who have lost one of their members by assassination, somehow able to join hands around the Table of the Lord.

World Communion Sunday contains an idea so big - and so dynamic that I confess I have always had trouble expressing it. It is about the future and there is a dimension to it that simply is too big for our words. The Communion of Saints is what we call it. It is our confidence that the future is one of reunion with all who are separated: that at the Lord's Table we are caught up in relationship with dear ones who have gone before us, with loved ones from whom we are separated by miles, with brothers and sisters of every land, and with neighbors, the real, flesh and blood people with whom you are worshipping this morning.

So let us come: all is ready: Jesus Christ our Lord invites us to the banquet He has set in the midst of the world.

Amen.